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ABSTRACT

A three-year study on the impact of admitting underprepared community college students on academic standards is reviewed, along with implications for postsecondary education. In summarizing factors contributing to a reduced emphasis on critical literacy at the community college, attention was directed to changes in institutional characteristics caused by changes in both the external environment and administrative policies. The study found that: (1) administrators emphasized course enrollments because of an enrollment-driven funding formula; (2) developing new programs to serve a more diverse student body while funds were restricted resulted in strategies to conserve funds, including the increased use of part-time faculty; and (3) because faculty were confronted with great diversity in student preparation and student objectives, they tested students for low-level cognitive objectives with multiple choice examinations, without requiring students to acquire or practice critical literacy skills. The questions of whether other community colleges face similar problems and whether critical literacy has declined in four-year institutions are addressed. Also considered are literacy and access issues at the urban community college and public urban university. (SW)

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UNDERSTANDING LITERACY IN A COLLEGE SETTING

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The movement from meritocratic to open access higher education has produced changes in the structure, size and diversity of the postsecondary enterprise that have been widely noted and discussed. The impact of these changes on the learning experience itself has been the subject of much speculation but few studies. Clearly, there are warning signals that growth may have been accompanied by less visible changes in qualitative standards as suggested by Involvement in Learning, the report of the Study Group on Excellence in American Higher Education. To their concerns about graduation rates in general, student performance on subject area tests of the Graduate Record Examination, and loss of curricular coherence because of increasing reliance on part-time faculty; must be added the recent news that minority progress toward equal access has leveled off with Blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans still underrepresented in four-year institutions. Of even greater concern is the significant decline in degree achievement reported for Black males.[1]

In 1978, The National Institute of Education funded a three-year study designed to examine, in depth, the impact on institutional standards when a college admits or actively recruits students who lack the academic preparation and objectives traditionally associated with college attendance. As well, the

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1 Wilson, Reginald and Melendez, Sarah E. Minorities in Higher Education: Third Annual Status Report. Washington, D.C.: ACE, 1984.

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*Paper presented at Session 12 of the 1985 National Conference on Higher Education, sponsored by the American Association for Higher Education on Sunday, March 17th. Permission to quote restricted.

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study was concerned with the impact of the institution, both on the new non-traditional students as well as on those who continued to attend for traditional reasons with traditional skills. The three-year study involved a single community college given the pseudonym of Oakwood. While the dominant strategy was ethnomethodology, the research team was drawn from such diverse fields as anthropology, sociology, English, psychology, public administration, reading and higher education. A complete summary of the project is available.[2] Selected aspects appear in Literacy in the Open Access College.[3]

In this article, I will summarize some of the key concepts that emerged from the study and address three related issues. Since this study focused on a single college and used predominantly an inductive approach, the results were hypotheses about changes in learning experiences for students rather than findings that could be generalized to other settings. The first issue then involves the extent to which the hypotheses from our study can usefully be applied to describe learning conditions generally as these occur in open access community colleges.

We chose to study a community college because such institutions have been on the cutting edge of a social policy aimed at making postsecondary education available to all who wish to attend. Community colleges have been described as more susceptible to administrative dominance[4] as well as less concerned about the academic character of courses designed to respond to community needs.[5] Clearly, the impact on student learning, of growth in size and diversity should be magnified in those institutions with the fewest barriers to change, but this observation raises a second issue. Four-year colleges and universities have not escaped the influences that have impacted most heavily on community colleges. Many urban universities count more community college transfers than native students in their graduating classes. And as Riesman notes, one result of the decline in enrollments has been to blur distinctions between community colleges and their four-year counterparts.[6] While this

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2 Richardson and others, ERIC Document ED 217-925

3 Richardson, Fisk, Okun. Jossey-Bass, 1983.

4 See for example, Mortimer and McConnell, Sharing Authority Effectively. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1978, p. 12.

5 Riesman, David On Higher Education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1981.

6 Riesman, On Higher Education, p. 196

second issue cannot be addressed from the perspective of the NIE study, a current research effort funded by the Ford Foundation and aimed at describing practices that facilitate or impede achievement of bachelors degrees by urban students who begin their postsecondary education in a community college, offers some insights.

A final issue involves the relationship between institutional policies and practices and observed outcomes. While it seems clear that many of the variables influencing student learning experiences including student characteristics, high school preparation and financial support both for individual and institutions are externally determined, it nonetheless seems useful to ask questions about those variables that are amenable to institutional control and to describe alternatives to current practice where these exist.

Critical Literacy Defined

The objective of examining the consequences of serving an increasingly diverse clientele both for an institution and for its students led to the choice of critical literacy as an operational construct. We defined critical literacy as the use of reading and writing within a particular setting to achieve an identifiable goal. Thus, critical literacy became the product of an interaction between students, faculty and their environments rather than an individual trait measured by a standardized examination. Our focus was on understanding the kinds of transactions that occurred as students went through the admissions process, registered for and attended classes and talked about their objectives and experiences. As well, we were interested in administrative and faculty interpretations of the educational process and the policy decisions they made to cope with the pressures that came from the district office, the community and an increasingly diverse student body.

Of course, we did not start out to study critical literacy. We began by asking faculty members what their courses were intended to accomplish and how. We asked students why they were there. And we asked administrators about their priorities and policies. Following this initial exploratory stage, we assigned participant observers to classrooms and to administrative councils and committees. We interviewed faculty members and department chairs and we sent members of the research team, some speaking only Spanish, through the admissions and registration process. Each semester members of the research team shared their data with college administrators and faculty as a way of giving something back to those upon whose cooperation the project depended and to confirm the accuracy of our observations. We found, as have Cooley and others[7], that sharing neutral observer perceptions about process and outcomes is a powerful catalyst for change, but our purpose was to understand the setting, not to alter it.

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7 Cooley, William W., "Improving the Performance of an Educational System", Educational Researcher, June-July, 1983, p. 4-12.

Ultimately, we reached a point in our work where it was necessary to find ways of explaining the relationships we had observed so that others could test our hypotheses in other settings. The process through which this was accomplished has been described in detail by Glaser.[8] We chose critical literacy as our unifying theme because it best explained what we had observed.

The concept of critical literacy grew out of our classroom observations where we saw few examples of the independent reading or writing of connected prose. What we did see was the restricted use of reading and writing to understand or produce fragmented language. We termed this use "bitting" because students copied bits of information from blackboards or skimmed textbooks to find answers to study-guide questions in preparation for multiple choice tests. In most classes, students were not required to write essays or research papers nor did they need to engage in independent reading of texts or other references in the absence of strong external cues from their instructors.

The contrasting form of language usage we termed "texting". Students were texting when they wrote essays or read a textbook chapter to understand content and emphasis. Texting represents the traditional view of the type of written language use or critical literacy that colleges ought to promote. We saw little texting at Oakwood. Instead, most practices seemed to discourage any natural inclination students might have had toward such use. For example, students who read textbooks in a "texting" fashion early in a semester soon discovered that such reading was unnecessary to recognize the specific information required to pass multiple choice examinations. To understand why bitting was emphasized and texting discouraged, it was necessary to look beyond the classroom.

The Literacy Study in Context

Figure 1 summarizes the influences that contributed to a reduced emphasis on critical literacy at Oakwood. Our attention was drawn initially to changes in institutional characteristics caused both by changes in the external environment and administrative policies.

The community college we studied was not a passive reactor to a changing external environment. District administrators sought to modify their environment and implemented policies aimed at increasing their resources and placing their institutions in more viable positions with respect to the selective parts of the external environment, which they screened. These administrative actions taken in the interests of institutional survival and viability, had conse-

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8 Glaser, B.G. Theoretical Sensitivity. Mill Valley, CA: The Sociology Press, 1978.

Figure 1

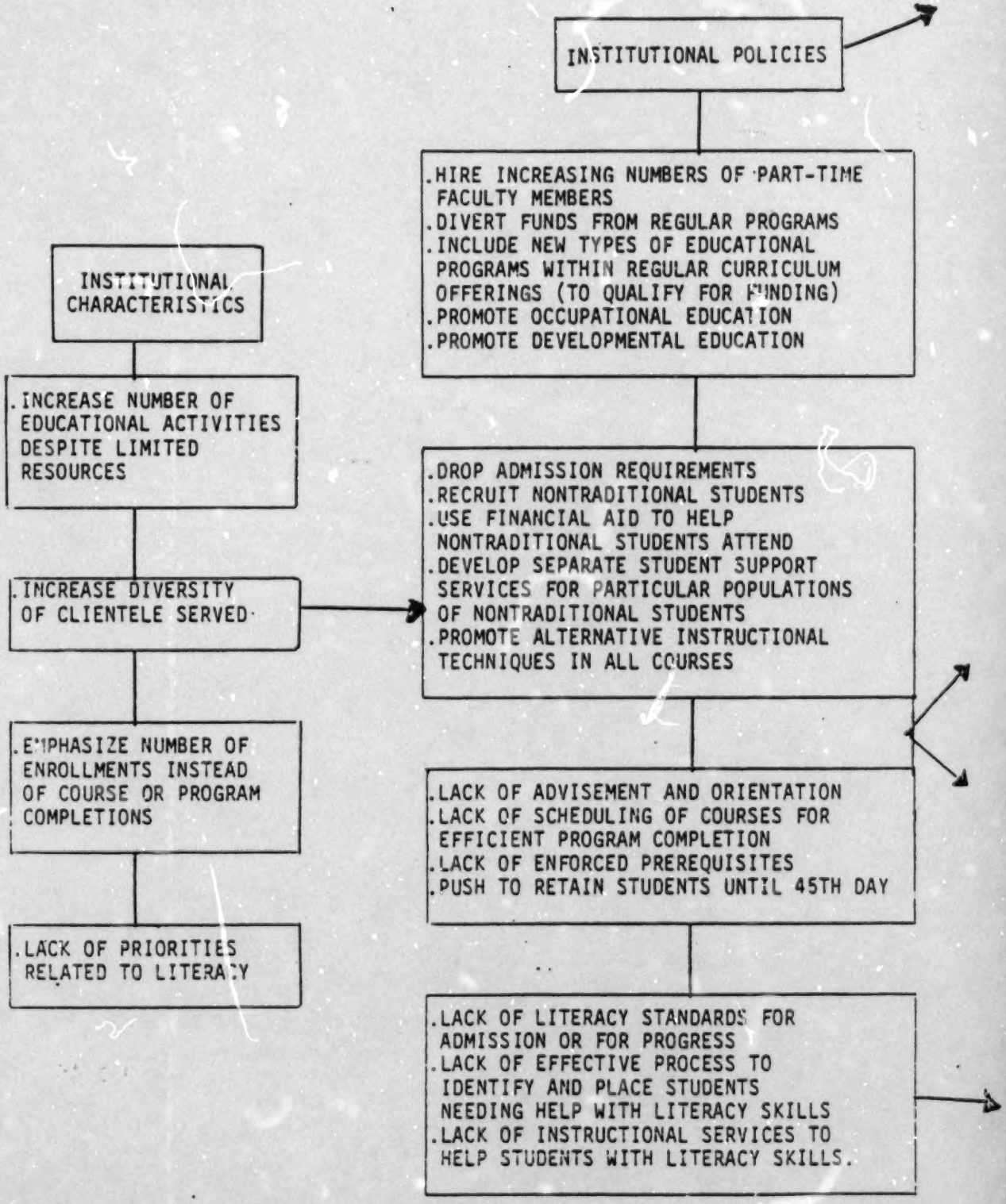

INSTITUTIONAL POLICIES
.HIRE INCREASING NUMBERS OF PART-TIME FACULTY MEMBERS
.DIVERT FUNDS FROM REGULAR PROGRAMS
.INCLUDE NEW TYPES OF EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS WITHIN REGULAR CURRICULUM OFFERINGS (TO QUALIFY FOR FUNDING)
.PROMOTE OCCUPATIONAL EDUCATION
.PROMOTE DEVELOPMENTAL EDUCATION
INSTITUTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS
.INCREASE NUMBER OF EDUCATIONAL ACTIVITIES DESPITE LIMITED RESOURCES
.INCREASE DIVERSITY OF CLIENTELE SERVED
.DROP ADMISSION REQUIREMENTS
.RECRUIT NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS
.USE FINANCIAL AID TO HELP NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS ATTEND
.DEVELOP SEPARATE STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES FOR PARTICULAR POPULATIONS OF NONTRADITIONAL STUDENTS
.PROMOTE ALTERNATIVE INSTRUCTIONAL TECHNIQUES IN ALL COURSES
.EMPHASIZE NUMBER OF ENROLLMENTS INSTEAD OF COURSE OR PROGRAM COMPLETIONS
.LACK OF ADVISEMENT AND ORIENTATION
.LACK OF SCHEDULING OF COURSES FOR EFFICIENT PROGRAM COMPLETION
.LACK OF ENFORCED PREREQUISITES
.PUSH TO RETAIN STUDENTS UNTIL 45TH DAY
.LACK OF PRIORITIES RELATED TO LITERACY
.LACK OF LITERACY STANDARDS FOR ADMISSION OR FOR PROGRESS
.LACK OF EFFECTIVE PROCESS TO IDENTIFY AND PLACE STUDENTS NEEDING HELP WITH LITERACY SKILLS
.LACK OF INSTRUCTIONAL SERVICES TO HELP STUDENTS WITH LITERACY SKILLS.

Figure 1 (cont'd)

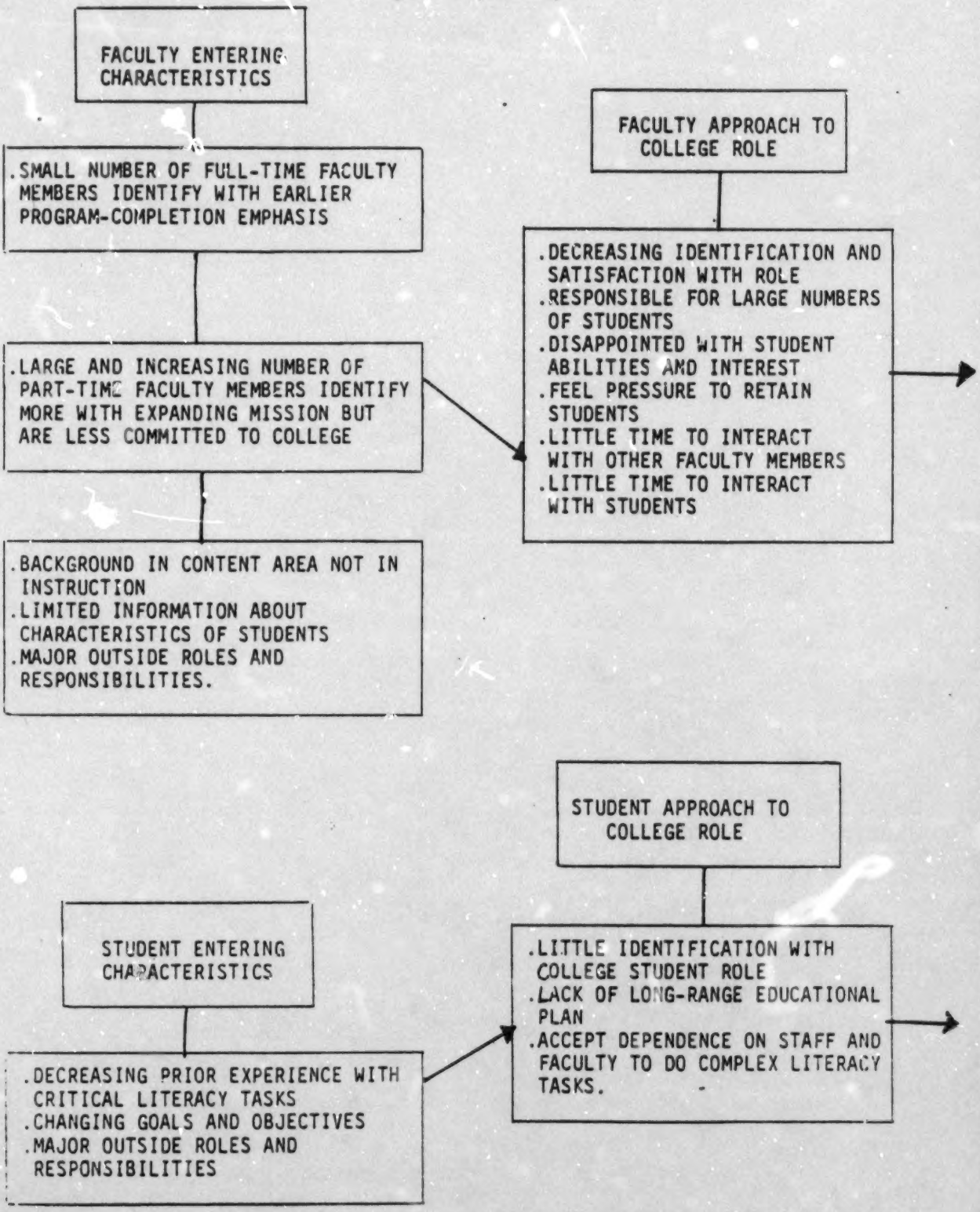
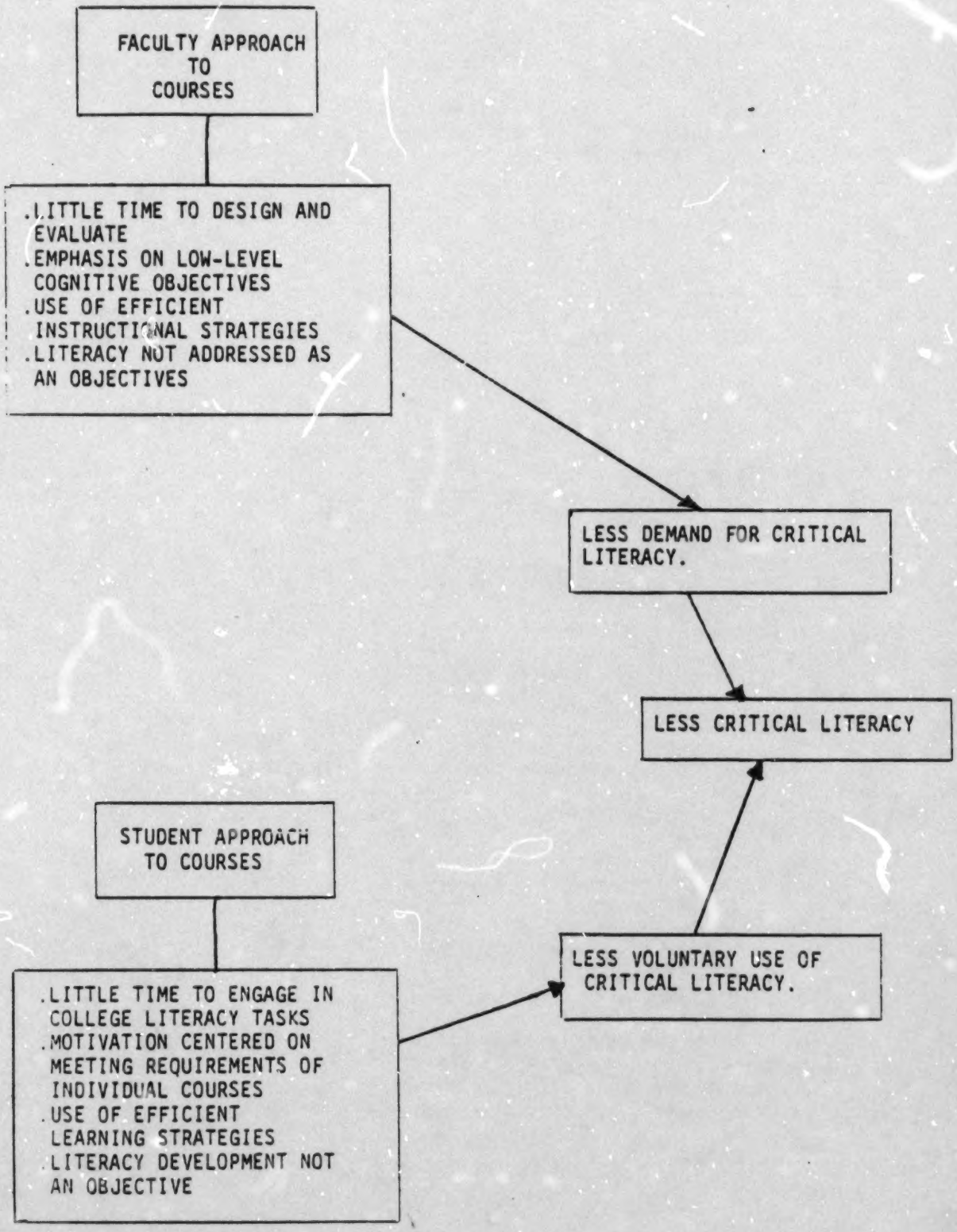

FACULTY ENTERING CHARACTERISTICS
.SMALL NUMBER OF FULL-TIME FACULTY MEMBERS IDENTIFY WITH EARLIER PROGRAM-COMPLETION EMPHASIS
.LARGE AND INCREASING NUMBER OF PART-TIME FACULTY MEMBERS IDENTIFY MORE WITH EXPANDING MISSION BUT ARE LESS COMMITTED TO COLLEGE
.BACKGROUND IN CONTENT AREA NOT IN INSTRUCTION
.LIMITED INFORMATION ABOUT CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENTS
.MAJOR OUTSIDE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES.
FACULTY APPROACH TO COLLEGE ROLE
.DECREASING IDENTIFICATION AND SATISFACTION WITH ROLE
.RESPONSIBLE FOR LARGE NUMBERS OF STUDENTS
.DISAPPOINTED WITH STUDENT ABILITIES AND INTEREST
.FEEL PRESSURE TO RETAIN STUDENTS
.LITTLE TIME TO INTERACT WITH OTHER FACULTY MEMBERS
.LITTLE TIME TO INTERACT WITH STUDENTS
STUDENT ENTERING CHARACTERISTICS
.DECREASING PRIOR EXPERIENCE WITH CRITICAL LITERACY TASKS
.CHANGING GOALS AND OBJECTIVES
.MAJOR OUTSIDE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES
STUDENT APPROACH TO COLLEGE ROLE
.LITTLE IDENTIFICATION WITH COLLEGE STUDENT ROLE
.LACK OF LONG-RANGE EDUCATIONAL PLAN
.ACCEPT DEPENDENCE ON STAFF AND FACULTY TO DO COMPLEX LITERACY TASKS.

Figure 1 (cont'd)


FACULTY APPROACH TO COURSES
.LITTLE TIME TO DESIGN AND EVALUATE
.EMPHASIS ON LOW-LEVEL COGNITIVE OBJECTIVES
.USE OF EFFICIENT INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES
.LITERACY NOT ADDRESSED AS AN OBJECTIVES
LESS DEMAND FOR CRITICAL LITERACY.
LESS CRITICAL LITERACY
STUDENT APPROACH TO COURSES
.LITTLE TIME TO ENGAGE IN COLLEGE LITERACY TASKS
.MOTIVATION CENTERED ON MEETING REQUIREMENTS OF INDIVIDUAL COURSES
.USE OF EFFICIENT LEARNING STRATEGIES
.LITERACY DEVELOPMENT NOT AN OBJECTIVE
LESS VOLUNTARY USE OF CRITICAL LITERACY.

quences for the educational program that were often unintended and frequently unnoticed.

Because of the enrollment-driven funding formula from which Oakwood derived its revenues, administrators emphasized course enrollments rather than course or program completions. Maximizing revenues meant offering as many courses without prerequisites as possible, and keeping enrollment sizes, even in remedial course, above the break-even point. Because Oakwood clientele had become more diverse, partly as a result of institutional marketing strategies, the college was under constant pressure to broaden the range of educational programs offered. For example, during our study a new basic skills block program was initiated for those who entered with reading skills below 8th grade level. Because Oakwood received funding for enrollments in this new program on the same basis as for transfer courses, any reductions in class size to accommodate the needs of those entering the basic skills block had to be offset by increased enrollments in other courses, a reality that administrators were quick to deny but faculty equally quick to recognize.

In the arena of institutional policies, the development of new programs to serve a more diverse clientele in an environment of fiscal constraint required strategies designed to conserve funds. Prominent among these strategies was the increasing use of part-time faculty. Whatever the merits of the teaching of part-time faculty, they were paid at a very low rate and were not expected to do advising or to be involved in program development or maintenance. The fact that more than half of the program ultimately came to be offered through faculty in adjunct status, conveyed to the full-time faculty a sense of hopelessness in terms of attempting to keep up with advising responsibilities. As the quality of advising diminished, the interest in program coherence also suffered. As a consequence, it became difficult for students in many programs to get the sequence of courses required to graduate in a reasonable time period. In fact, there was little relationship between courses in the class schedule and the programs that appeared in the college catalog. Administrators also emphasized alternate instructional techniques. The good faculty members were those who did not require students to engage in reading by providing them with alternative means of getting the same information. Of course, the alternative means most commonly fostered dependence on faculty members rather than independence in the acquisition of knowledge. Finally, Oakwood had no standards for student progress. To keep students eligible for financial assistance for as long as possible, Oakwood had a policy which permitted earning up to fifteen hours toward an associate in general education degree for remedial courses. Students could remain eligible by taking essentially the same fifteen hours semester after semester.

Institutional characteristics and institutional policies influenced the ways in which faculty and students approached the learning process. Because faculty were confronted with great diversity in student preparation and student objectives, they adopted efficient instructional strategies. These efficient

strategies were methods of conveying content by separating it from the critical literacy requirements commonly associated with college level learning. Faculty passed out outlines and emphasized information in lectures. They tested for low-level cognitive objectives with multiple choice examinations. Students could meet their objectives of earning a grade in a course without engaging in the connected writing or reading we have traditionally associated with the acquisition and practice of critical literacy skills.

Of course, faculty adopted these efficient instructional strategies because they were under severe pressure from students, 70% of whom were part-time, taking only a single course and not interested in earning a degree. Such students had heavy outside responsibilities in terms of work and family, and were resistant to doing anything more than learning the minimum knowledge necessary to pass the multiple choice examinations. The attitude that the appropriate behavior in courses consisted of negotiating a set of minimum demands with faculty, and then meeting these with the least possible expenditure of outside effort was fostered by the absence among most students in most courses of any perceived relationship between being in class and the students' educational objectives.

Put another way, most students saw classes as obstacles to be overcome in the pursuit of a degree. They did not perceive any relationship between the content they were learning and their ultimate objective, which was either to get a job or to upgrade themselves in a job they already held. We found, as have London and others,[9] a small percentage of students who possessed an interest in subject matter that went beyond simply meeting the requirements for a grade. Such students were the target of discrimination, both by students and by faculty. In brief, their interest in going beyond minimum requirements, made them modern day "rate busters" and their efforts were not welcomed by their colleagues in the learning experience.

During the three-year period of our study, we observed the continuing erosion of critical literacy requirements. We cannot be sure that this was a consequence of a reduction in the ability or preparation of the students in the transfer courses. In fact, it appeared that the major determinant of this decline was the objectives rather than the preparation of the students. Students wanted to meet requirements with the minimum possible expenditure of effort. Faculty confronted with a majority of students pursuing efficient learning strategies compromised by preserving content at the expense of relinquishing the process through which content has been traditionally learned at the college level. Students were not required to engage in independent

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9 London, Howard B. The Culture of a Community College. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1978.

reading or writing activities and thus, we found in most Oakwood classes a lack of emphasis on critical literacy.

Some may wonder why anyone in a technologically oriented society should be concerned because college students obtain and use bits of information from instructor handouts or computers rather than engaging in more traditional forms of reading and writing. Our concern was motivated by the importance of community colleges as the major point of entry through which disadvantaged urban populations gain access to opportunities for upward social mobility. In a society that is top-heavy with credentials, employers look increasingly at where degrees were earned. Once on the job, workers in a knowledge society are promoted, as much on their ability to use language critically and independently as they are on specialized knowledge, which goes rapidly out of date. But, before spending too much time worrying about whether those who attend community colleges may be at peril in comparison with their four-year counterparts, it will be useful to raise the question of whether the hypotheses formed from our study of Oakwood represent reasonable explanations of what happens in community colleges, generally.

Is the Oakwood Story Atypical?

Here we are, of course, on much more tenuous ground but the question cannot be avoided. Oakwood was a well-established college with excellent facilities and funding, a highly competent and well-prepared professional staff and a student body drawn predominantly from a suburban and majority population. On the surface there was no reason to believe that Oakwood was different from other reasonably affluent, mainstream community colleges.

One source of information about the question of comparability came from a companion study funded concurrently by NIE but conducted independently at the University of Texas at Austin. The findings were strikingly similar as suggested by the following excerpts from that report:

> "There are, however, grave concerns which arise from our findings that students come to expect, through their college experiences, that reading and writing are not important in themselves - that instructors do not demand anything from them beyond brief, disjointed responses to specific, narrow questions."
>
> "The reduction of reading and writing tasks to those performative activities that extract information from context that require no demonstration of synthesis/comprehension of larger issues cannot be construed as ever improving or developing students ability to read and write."[10]

[10] Roueche, S.D. and Comstock. U.N. "A Report on Theory and Methods for the Study of Literacy Development in Community Colleges" (ERIC Document ED 211, 161) NIE, 1981. Pp 1-45, 1-61.

A third source of information on the generalization issue is much more personal and subjective. Since publication of Literacy in the Open Access College, I have visited with faculty and administrators across the country. I have asked whether the practices described were significantly different from those in their own institutions. And I have asked, are there better explanations for what we saw? Perhaps it is the normal courtesy accorded a visitor but, to date, no one has taken serious exception to the accuracy of our descriptions, nor has anyone suggested that the practices we saw at Oakwood were different in kind from their own experiences.

A final approach to testing whether learning experiences at Oakwood were comparable to those in other community colleges involves looking at similarities in institutional policies as these have evolved from the academically oriented community colleges of the 60's, serving predominantly a full-time student population, to the vocationally oriented "community based learning centers" of the 80's serving a part-time student population, that may amount to as many as 70% of those enrolled, as was the case at Oakwood.

Beginning at the end of the 60's and extending through the last decade, many community colleges including Oakwood, initiated a series of policy changes that affected most areas of institutional operation. The half-day orientation sessions common in the early 60's were relinquished in favor of efficient strategies for getting students into discrete courses. Demands on full-time faculty and counselors for advising were reduced through sound and slide presentations. An advising system, never robust, collapsed for all but those in selective vocational programs, under the weight of the influx of part-time students and the growing numbers of part-time faculty whose miserly compensation was justified by limiting their responsibilities to meeting classes.

Where institutions made an effort to assess the preparation of entering students, the effort extended only to those attending full-time who applied early enough to follow prescribed institutional procedures. Placement on the basis of competency was most commonly voluntary. For many institutions, this meant that two-thirds or more of the students in college credit transfer offerings enrolled without benefit of any assessment of whether they possessed the requisite skills. Faced with incredible diversity in their classrooms, faculty preserved an emphasis on mastery of content by finding ways of transmitting and testing for discrete units of knowledge producing the bitting forms of literacy previously described.

Students, especially those from minority backgrounds, resisted the notion of taking courses that did not carry credit. Regulations for veterans, as well as the advent of need-based financial aid placed additional pressure on colleges serving large numbers of underprepared students to offer credit for all courses, including English as a Second Language, and grammar school arithmetic. Offering credit was not enough; the courses had to be applicable to some degree and so, a new degree, the associate in general education, was created. Any

student who earned the requisite number of hours could receive a degree without the necessity of following a prescribed program.

The impact of these and other policy changes, including non-punitive grading and the absence of standards for progress produced increased access measured by rates of participation but declining rates of achievement, measured by such traditional indicators as number of graduates and the numbers and performance of transfer students. Interestingly, at the same time these developments were taking place in most areas of the curriculum, the level of achievement in selective allied health programs was improving under the influence of certifying agencies. However, participation of minority students in such programs remained well below the levels of their involvement in open access areas.

The changes described above have been widely noted in the literature on community colleges. Indeed, most of these changes have been cited as virtues and they well may be in terms of promoting access. They do not, however, promote critical literacy and for that reason, contribute to current concerns about quality and achievement.

In one sense, it is not appropriate to describe the conditions we observed at Oakwood as the norm for community colleges, a point that McCabe emphasizes in his review of Literacy in the Open-Access College.[11] In another, as McCabe acknowledges, the problem of literacy is a pervasive one for education in America and one that has fallen with particular force on community colleges. It is clear that practices vary considerably among institutions of the same type. Equally, it is apparent that community colleges have made significant changes in several of these policy areas since we concluded our study. Despite these qualifications, the weight of evidence suggests that the hypotheses we formed from our study of Oakwood were applicable to most community colleges, at the time of our study. A more intriguing question involves the extent to which they were also applicable to four-year institutions, an issue raised by McCabe, as well as Riesman.

Has Critical Literacy Declined in Four-Year Institutions?

There is no way of addressing this question within the context of our original study. Within the past year, however, the Ford Foundtion has funded two research projects aimed at analyzing state and institutional policies which impede or facilitate progress to the baccalaureate degree for students who begin their postsecondary education in community colleges in eight major urban areas around the country. In each of these areas, site visits have been made to an urban community college and to an adjacent urban university where the

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11 Change, March, 1984, p. 50

greatest number of transfer students matriculate. The policy areas examined during these site visits were the same as those that emerged as important in our study of critical literacy at Oakwood. While the results of this project will not be available until November, 1985, institutional site visits have been completed, so it is possible to form some preliminary impressions. While the public urban universities participating in the study are by no means representative of four-year colleges and universities in general, they, like community colleges, serve populations that come disproportionately from big city public school systems noted for the large numbers of underprepared students they graduate. Their practices, therefore, probably represent more the extreme four-year college and university accommodation to changes in levels of critical literacy than the norm.

Despite demographic pressures, most of the universities participating in the Ford project have remained relatively selective in comparison with their community college counterparts. While the degree of selectivity varied, only one could be described as open-access and even for this institution the description had to be qualified because the institution, by state law, was required to accept all graduates of high schools within the state who followed a prescribed college preparatory curriculum. Significantly, this university operates a large vestibule program into which are placed on a mandatory basis those community college transfers and students applying directly from high school who do not score at an appropriate level on a placement examination. Minority students are overrepresented in the vestibule program and underrepresented in the university, at large.

In addition to selective admissions to most institutions there are differential standards for being admitted to the colleges. Business and Engineering apply the most rigorous requirements while Arts and Sciences provide an alternative for those who lack the prerequisites for admission to a professional school but are admissable to the university. The practice is not unlike the preprofessional programs offered within community colleges where students removed deficiencies and await their turn for admission to the program of their choice.

Where pressures from articulation agreements or state coordinating agencies place pressure on faculty to accept community college courses they do not believe to be the equivalent of their own offerings, a number of practices have developed aimed at screening the competencies of transfer students. Several universities administer validation examinations designed to assess whether transfers possess knowledge that is prerequisite to an advanced course. Students who fail such examinations may find that credit is being held "in escrow" until they complete the next course in the sequence. Additionally, there is considerable juggling of the curriculum to place as many courses as possible beyond the reach of community colleges by assigning them upper division status. Partly as a result of these practices, community college transfers often end up with more elective credits and fewer credits in the major than desirable, in terms of optimum progression to a degree.

All of these practices and others might suggest that four-year colleges and universities have insulated themselves from the changes in critical literacy

requirements that have taken place in community colleges. But, there is additional evidence that places this conclusion in doubt.

The urban universities in the Ford Project are heavily dependent on transfer students, most of whom come from community colleges. Institutional research data demonstrates clearly that transfer students who spend the equivalent of two years in a community college and who complete a coherent program comparable to the first two years of the university program perform nearly as well as native students and graduate at comparable rates. They achieve success in the more selective schools of engineering and business, as well as in education and arts and sciences. While transfers do not perform as well in the more competitive environment of the university as they did in the more nurturing environment of the community college, they, nonetheless, achieve at respectable levels, particularly when one considers that many of them were not eligible to attend the university at the time they graduated from high school.

And so, the evidence on critical literacy in four-year colleges and universities is mixed. Quite clearly, these institutions have escaped the pressures of coping with the numbers of underprepared students that have entered community colleges. Equally important, university faculty have been more successful in resisting administrative pressures to alter traditional practices to accommodate non-traditional students. Yet, both community college transfers and native university students graduate with bachelors degrees without being able to demonstrate the tenth grade competencies in reading, writing and mathematics required by some states on teacher certification exams. It seems unlikely that this phenomenon is confined to schools of education since their majors take the same arts and sciences courses in the lower division required for all professional schools.

Clearly, there is a difference between the emphasis on competencies and techniques that characterizes the professional school and the focus on critical literacy that ought to characterize general education offerings. It is equally evident that the same students who resist critical literacy requirements in general education offerings where they perceive little relationship between such requirements and their objectives for attending college, are much less resistant to engaging in critical literacy behaviors in courses where they do see a direct payoff in terms of career objectives. The problem arises from the lack of integration between the content-oriented professional faculty who could require critical literacy behaviors but typically do not and the general education faculty who are supposed to emphasize critical literacy but either do not or cannot. The problem is not helped by the tendency for universities to turn over responsibility for many general education courses to graduate assistants or part-time lecturers.

Universities have not been unaware of the threat to program quality posed by these conditions. The current emphasis on writing across the curriculum is both an acknowledgement of the decline in critical literacy requirements and an attempt to correct the problem by emphasizing the responsibility of faculty in professional fields to promote the independent and critical use of language. The successful efforts of many formerly upper division and graduate universities in adding freshman and sophomore classes has had, as part of its agenda,

achieving more consistent standards for critical literacy among those accepted to junior standing. And universities in a growing number of states have increased admission requirements.

On one level, universities deserve praise for their efforts to preserve academic standards and to require better preparation from new matriculants. From a different perspective, it is already apparent that one consequence of the movement toward increased standards has been to increase the disproportionate number of minority students already concentrated in community colleges where several studies have suggested they have the least chance of persisting to a baccalaureate degree.[12] Despite the increased proportion of minority students in high school graduating classes, many urban universities are experiencing a declining percentage of minorities among their student bodies. And those who do attend, graduate at about half the rate of their non-minority counterparts. These developments have not escaped the attention of legislators and coordinating boards. The policy issues are complex and not susceptible to simple solutions.

Strengthening Critical Literacy Without Sacrificing Access

As important as it is to strengthen the ability of college graduates to engage in critical literacy, this objective cannot be pursued at the expense of access without serious consequences for colleges as well as society. Those who see quality and access as mutually exclusive assume that our choices are limited to returning to the practices of the sixties to improve quality or continuing to emphasize current practices to optimize access. There are other alternatives.

The urban community college and the public urban university are creations of the past quarter century. As the life span of institutions is calculated, both are young, and to this point, have pursued largely independent directions. Universities have been concerned about the development of graduate programs and research. Where discretionary funds have been available to improve learning conditions for underprepared students, they have developed special programs of demonstrated efficiency. When discretionary funds are cut, the institution faced with the choice of preserving services for disadvantaged students or continuing development as research institutions. The decision to focus on the latter is inevitable and understandable particularly when one considers the level of competition that characterizes state four-year systems and the proportion of underprepared students being served by urban universities in contrast to their flagship counterparts in less urban settings.

Urban universities do what they can to improve their learning environments within the constraints of available resources and competing institutional priorities. Most would like the option of providing residence halls for more of their students. Created as commuter institutions, many see the absence of such facilities as a barrier in providing effective learning conditions for

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12 Astin, Alexander W. Minorities in American Higher Education. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1982.

minorities. Most also recognize the scarcity of minority role models among their faculty and administrative staffs as a particular handicap and several have created incentive lines for departments able to recruit qualified minority faculty.

Of course, many of the problems in urban settings can be traced to the achievement levels of students graduating from the public schools. Both community colleges and public universities have programs for "adopting" inner city schools to strengthen academic offerings and to encourage students to avoid the deficiencies in mathematics and science which so severely constrain opportunities for later schooling. Urban universities and community colleges alike offer extensive remedial work but there is at least tacit recognition that students, more than marginally deficient, have a better chance in the community college with its wider range of course offerings, greater flexibility in time requirements, more commitment to working with the underprepared and a generally more supportive environment.

Community colleges are beginning to reemphasize orientation and advisement. There is much less reluctance to require placement on the basis of assessed competencies and there are fewer loopholes for students to enter classes without being assessed. Some urban community colleges award scholarships on the basis of merit rather than need and have initiated honors programs. The excessive emphasis on jobs and training is giving way to a more balanced effort to provide career opportunities while placing renewed emphasis on baccalaureate options. In some urban areas, universities are aiding this effort by offering transition courses taught by university faculty on community college campuses. As well greater attention is being given to improving advising, orientation and support services for transfers. Special attention is being given to the needs of minorities.

Recent legislation, which requires students receiving federal financial aid make satisfactory progress toward a defined objective in order to remain eligible, has given a boost to urban community colleges where two-thirds or more of all students receive financial assistance. There is growing concern as well with the validation of learning experiences through some assessment of exit competencies. There are probably better measures of the ability to display critical literacy skills than counting the number of words students write during their lower division experience as mandated by the State of Florida. Community college leaders increasingly recognize that a more desirable alternative to state requirements or validation exams administered by universities may be the definition and assessment of exit competencies by their own staffs. However, the difficulties of getting agreement on what the competencies should be, and how they should be measured are formidable. Whether or not current efforts to identify and assess competencies come to fruition, they will have served a purpose in sensitizing faculty and administrators alike to the need for common expectations for critical literacy in the first two years of the baccalaureate experience.

Perhaps the most important development of all involves the greater recognition among both university and community college leaders of the need to improve cooperation and coordination. When resources and students were in oversupply,

institutions were free to pursue their independently planned priorities. Accountability meant demonstrating an increase in the number of students enrolled for the current year. And concerns for equity were satisfied by reporting participation rates.

In todays environment, the rules have changed. The question is not how many but with what results. Improving the achievement of students who lack traditional preparation offers a significant challenge that urban institutions cannot easily escape. The demographics for at least the next decade indicate there will be far fewer students with traditional preparation than can be accommodated by available capacity. It will not be enough to find institutions that will award credentials for learning experiences devoid of appropriate emphasis on critical literacy. Credentials are useful in securing entry level employment only to the degree they are scarce and signify the possession of required competencies. The limitations of credentials without competencies are no where more evident than in the growing use of teacher certification exams to screen college graduates for minimum skills in reading, writing and mathematics.

Urban areas are threatened by the absence of critical literacy skills among high percentages of their population. Urban universities and community colleges represent the best hope for interrupting the channeling process through which those who lack such skills gain credentials as teachers and return to perpetuate their own inadequacies through the public school system.[13] Achieving this hope will require conscious effort to improve communication and to see roles as mutually complementary rather than competitive or independent.

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[13] For a description of this process, see Orfield, Gary and others, The Chicago Study of Access and Choice in Higher Education. Chicago: Committee on Public Policy Studies of the University of Chicago, 1984.